

The Confluence of Curriculum Theory and the Phenomenological for the Critical Pedagogue

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Abstract

In this article the author explores the confluence of curriculum theory and the phenomenological by utilizing the assumptions and foundations inherent in critical pedagogical theory. The author will first explore the meaning of these concepts, along with an examination of the relationship between the phenomenological and contemporary curricular theory. An analysis of the reconceptualization of the curriculum field will also be presented and how this evolution has impacted the use of the phenomenological within the classroom environment. Finally, the theory of critical pedagogy will be examined in relation to the contemporary curricularist and the modern-day notion of the phenomenological. This examination seeks to facilitate the critical pedagogue, whose aim is to break down the hegemonic barriers within the classroom.

Introduction

Background

The purpose of this paper is to explore the confluence of curriculum theory and the phenomenological by utilizing the assumptions and foundations inherent in critical pedagogical theory. First, this paper will define the meaning of these concepts, along with an examination of the relationship between the phenomenological and contemporary curricular theory. Next, an analysis of the reconceptualization of the curriculum field will be presented and how this evolution has

impacted the use of the phenomenological within the classroom environment. Finally, the theory of critical pedagogy will be examined in relation to the contemporary curricularist and the modern-day notion of the phenomenological.

This notion of understanding curriculum phenomenologically begins with a focus on individual perception and experience. It calls for educators to examine the impact of curricula on students in terms of what is lived, not simply what is theorized (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2004). This concept necessitates an exploration into individual educational experiences and perceptions in order to comprehend these experiences with new meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Pinar et al., 2004). This is the starting point for the critical pedagogue, whose goal it is to critique the unthinking application of educational practices and implement what is learned from the phenomenological perspective in a concrete and practical manner (Choules, 2007).

Research Questions

This exploration of phenomenology and its position within an educational context is designed to address two crucial questions. First, what is the relationship between curriculum theory and the phenomenological? Second, how does the critical pedagogue facilitate and utilize the phenomenological paradigm? The work of van Manen (1982) demonstrates the importance of these two questions because of the “certain blindness” (p. 291) that is present in today’s positivistic educational systems and practices. Because the phenomenological seeks to understand what it is like to have a certain educational experience, this perspective “helps us to bring to light that which presents itself as pedagogy” (van Manen, 1982, p. 296). Its focus is the lived world of the learner and the lived experience of students, teachers, schools, and curricula (Pinar, 1975; Pinar et al., 2004; van Manen, 1982).

These questions into the phenomenological perspective help to transform an educator’s perception from one that is naïve and immediate to one that is reflective and deliberate. This ability facilitates an understanding of how the student actually and concretely experiences the classroom, the school, and all of education (van Manen, 1979).

Thesis

The endeavor to understand curriculum phenomenologically is an essential discourse and a necessary aim for the critical pedagogue (Kincheloe & Horn, 2007; Pinar et al., 2004; van Manen, 1982). This phenomenological perspective enables educators to be more critical and reflective in their evaluation of curricular practices and the impact these strategies have on students. However, the insight and knowledge derived from this reflective approach is not merely theoretical. A phenomenological approach enables educators to understand the authentic, lived world of students so that practical approaches may be derived to guide educators on how to act. Although phenomenology, in general, is not

inherently critical, this approach has much to offer the critical pedagogue (Pinar, 1975; Pinar et al., 2004).

Its practical intent is guided by a viewpoint that values the learner's point of view and an individual's perception of the experience that is education (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach enables educators to examine more carefully educational arrangements and tools designed to maintain existing power relationships and contemporary sociopolitical order (Kincheloe & Horn, 2007; Pinar, 1975).

Phenomenology and Contemporary Curriculum Theory

Understanding the Concepts

In order to understand the confluence of curriculum theory and the phenomenological for the critical pedagogue, it is first necessary to understand the meaning and context of these terms. These definitions are necessary elements and provide referential and inferential direction for the educator to help clarify these complex concepts with an appropriate measure of assurance (Asghari, 2004; Donalek, 2004). For example, curriculum has traditionally been defined as "a plan for action or a written document that includes strategies for achieving desired goals or ends" (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004, p. 10). However, this description is deficient for educators who view the field more broadly. For these educators, curriculum is understood to be the totality of learner experiences in relation to all educational arrangements and practices, as well as the political, racial, social, and gender-oriented issues outside the classroom (Choules, 2007; Dewey, 1997; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004; Pinar et al., 2004).

The latter definition will be the focus of this paper's analysis due to its orientation on experience and its congruence with the phenomenological. This perspective has its foundation in the qualitative research field of phenomenology, an approach that seeks to disclose and explain the variation of ways of experiencing a phenomenon. The aim of this approach is to gain in-depth understanding of the nature and meaning of the lived experience (Asghari, 2004; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gibson, 2006; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). For the educator, "phenomenology is an academic discipline; it is a method of thinking and describing thinking" (Streb, 1984, p. 159). This perspective allows educators to consider the student's point of view and interpretation of the educational experience. It is a "disciplined, rigorous effort to understand experience profoundly and authentically" (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 405).

This idea of the phenomenological can serve as a crucial ingredient of critical pedagogy because it provokes a change in the manner in which educators think and act (Pinar et al., 2004). This change occurs because "our taken-for-granted notions of self-understanding, reflection, and practical competence are all reconceived in phenomenological inquiry" (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 413). This

reconception is central to the critical pedagogue, who seeks to “understand, analyze, pose questions, and affect and effect the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape our lives” (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1995, p. 334).

However, what does this really mean to today’s educator? Based on the work of Paulo Frère, critical pedagogy undertakes a social justice stance and is concerned with the manner in which educational systems perpetuate inequities that are inherent in our society (Kincheloe & Horn, 2007). However, this does not take place in the abstract. This critique is designed to transform the policies and practices of real educational communities and circumstances (Kincheloe & Horn, 2007; Leistyna et al., 1995; Pinar et al., 2004). The phenomenological can facilitate this transformation because its goal is to reveal that which is hidden and disclose the role of educators and students in the process of learning and teaching (Leistyna et al., 1995; North, 2007; Pinar, 1975; Pinar et al., 2004).

Method of Currere

Pinar et al. (2004) writes that one practical method for the critical pedagogue to integrate the phenomenological is through the method of *currere*. He writes “*currere* [author’s emphasis] focuses on the educational experience of the individual as reported by the individual” (p. 414). Similarly, Grumet (1987) explains that *currere* enables the educator to recognize the impact of the past, present, and future on the learning experience. It recognizes the complexity and subjectivity of knowledge and the impact of social, economic, political, and sexual experiences on a student’s educational experience. Pinar et al. (2004) expands on this perspective:

Currere [author’s emphasis], in contrast, is grounded in context. The method of *currere* offers the opportunity to study both the individual lived experience and the impact of the social milieu upon that experience. It seeks to depict and reflectively comprehend the impact of the milieu as well as the subject’s past upon the educational experience of the individual in the present. (p. 416)

Utilizing critical pedagogy as a lens through which to understand and utilize the method of *currere*, an educator can attempt to reduce the authoritative power between teacher and student, thus reducing the likelihood of hegemonic imposition (Leistyna et al., 1995; North, 2007; Pinar, 1975). This is accomplished by implementing “a form of autobiographical curriculum theory” (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 414) inherent in *currere*. This method is designed to assist educators to reconceptualize the meaning of curriculum by investigating their own biographical experience with education. This self-analysis by the educator is believed to allow for a better understanding of present-day curriculum (Pinar, 1975).

Like Dewey’s (1997) theory of educational continuity, which states that “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 35), *currere*

posits that the synergy of an educator's past, present, and future educational experiences provides new meaning to curriculum (Pinar, 1975; Pinar et al., 2004). In other words, currere calls for educators to use their own past, present, and future educational experiences as a data source to understand how these factors influence their work as a teacher. Furthermore, this autobiographical analysis assists in the understanding of how these experiences affect relationships with students, colleagues, and an educator's perception of curriculum (Pinar, 1975).

Curriculum Reconceptualization

The use of the phenomenological perspective, such as the method of currere, is not a new approach within the field of education (Pinar, 1977; Pinar et al., 2004). In fact, this perspective was one of the results of a wide-ranging reconceptualization of the curricular field during the 1970s and represented an opposition to traditional educational practices of that time (Pinar et al., 2004). For curricularists, this reconceptualization was characterized by the questioning of the prevailing technical-scientific approach to education and its propensity to utilize standardization and a uniform body of knowledge. The reconceptualization of the 1970s rejected the context-free notion of education and sought to follow a more nontechnical-nonscientific approach. This reconceptualized, nontechnical-nonscientific perspective accepted the value of a student's experiences and believed that learners construct and define their own legitimate reality (English, 1998; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004; Pinar et al., 2004).

Stone (1979) illustrates this contrast between the reconceptualized notion of curriculum and the established technical approach of employing only standardized, quantitative analysis in the classroom:

Phenomenology is also a critique of studies that purport to be empirical where quantification has been used in order to produce some broad generalizations that are based on statistical interpretations of data. Whether the findings have been derived from formal precepts or are based on the observable behavior of human beings, phenomenologists argue that idealistic and empirical investigations can't fully probe the lived experience of the subject being studied. (p. 2)

However, this reconceptualization of the curricular field did not fully emerge nor sustain itself in practice. Early in the 1980s, a conservative view on education reignited the technical-scientific approach and shifted the focus away from learner experiences and the practical use of the phenomenological within the classroom (Horn, 2004; Pinar et al., 2004). Pinar et al. (2004) explains that "by 1980, however, the curriculum field had separated from the schools, and was traveling on its own, rather different path" (p. 238). This path is defined as the current standards and accountability movement (Horn, 2004), characterized by "conceptual or factual criteria representing knowledge, skills, or attitudes that

are established by an authority” (Horn, 2004, p. 1) and “the use and dominance of scientific and business principles in educational organization, management, teaching, and learning” (Horn, 2004, p. 15). As a result, the phenomenological discourse that stressed the importance of examining curriculum through the experiences of students and teachers, as well as politically, historically, and socially, became removed from today’s practice and relegated only to theoretical supposition (Horn, 2004; Pinar et al., 2004).

Phenomenology and the Critical Pedagogue

The current relegation of the phenomenological to merely theoretical conjecture outside the lived world of the classroom creates a vital imperative for the critical pedagogue (Grumet, 1978; Horn, 2004; Kincheloe & Horn, 2007; Pinar et al., 2004). In this context, educators begin to understand that critical pedagogy is a call to action that is responsive to the context of the life stories of learners (Egbo, 2008; North, 2007). The relationship between curriculum theory and experience becomes clear because the phenomenological requires a careful examination of all educational practices and its impact on the learner (English, 1998; Grumet, 1978; Leistyna et al., 1995; Pinar et al., 2004). Furthermore, the practice of the phenomenological in the classroom evolves into a practical understanding of the pedagogical relationships that exist between teacher and student (Pinar et al., 2004; van Manen, 1994).

Practical Implications

Yet, how does the critical pedagogue impact these existing relationships and make practical use of the phenomenological inside the concrete world of the classroom? First, the critical pedagogue must recognize the significance of the radical shift in the approach to education over the last two decades and how it significantly differs from the context of the reconceptualization. Today, most contemporary educators adhere to a traditionalist perspective and follow a predominantly technical-scientific approach to education. This is typically reflected in the focus on standards, testing, and accountability in today’s schools (Gibson, 2006; Horn, 2004; Kincheloe & Horn, 2007; Stone, 1979). This focus is often characterized by a service to narrow political, educational, or social interests, rather than on the needs and interests of learners (English, 1998; Horn, 2004; Pinar, 1977; Pinar et al., 2004).

However, critical pedagogy directs an educator to use methods of inquiry to uncover the deficiencies that are inherent in the technical-scientific approach (Egbo, 2008; Horn, 2004; Kincheloe & Horn, 2007). Furthermore, a critical perspective requires an educator to reveal “the implications of a phenomenon related to social justice, an ethic of caring, and democratic participation” (Horn, 2007, p. 74). This is facilitated by a phenomenological approach because of this perspective’s openness to the subjective experiences of students. For example, “when students are asked about their relationship with teachers, their anecdotes reveal

that classroom interactions are always relational; teachers and students cannot help but stand in certain relation to each other” (van Manen, 1994, p. 151).

These relationships are one of the starting points for the critical pedagogue (Pinar et al., 2004). A phenomenological focus demonstrates that these relationships have much significance inside and outside the classroom. For example, experiential narratives from both teacher and student reveal significant consequences to the teacher-student relationship, such as the potential for marginalization and hegemonic imposition (Grumet, 1987; Streb, 1984; van Manen, 1994). Using this approach in the classroom offers an alternative to the narrow way of developing and evaluating curriculum and other educational practices posed by the existing technical approach (Egbo, 2008; Horn, 2004; Kincheloe & Horn, 2007; Whatley, 2005). Whereas critical pedagogy involves a variety of diverse methods, the phenomenological is a self-reflective, autonomous solution to the “rigid set of prescribed steps or models” (Whatley, 2005, p. 99) common in today’s schools.

To this end, the phenomenological has much to offer the critical pedagogue (Abrahams, 2005; English, 1997; Horn, 2004; Leistyna et al., 1995). This collaborative approach, with its focus on experience, transforms education into a “conversation where students and their teachers pose and solve problems together” (Abrahams, 2005, p. 64). The act of conversation is empowering and transformative to both students and teachers, allowing the broadening of reality and a new understanding of experiences inside and outside the classroom (Abrahams, 2005; Pinar et al., 2004; van Manen, 1994). According to Abrahams (2005), this is possible because the phenomenological enables the critical pedagogue to address the inherent political nature of education and acknowledge the power and control inherent in all areas of education. However, the phenomenological enables the critical pedagogue to “transcend these constraints by focusing on the valuable knowledge students bring to the classroom” (p. 64).

Conclusion

Not only does the phenomenological reveal the crucial knowledge students bring to the classroom through their experiences, but it also enables teachers to draw upon their own autobiographical narrative so that practical approaches can be derived to guide day-to-day practices to benefit all learners (Pinar, 1975; Pinar, 1977; Pinar et al., 2004). This can facilitate the critical pedagogue, whose aim is to break down the hegemonic barriers within the classroom. Not only does a phenomenological perspective allow an educator to utilize “a system designed to produce knowledge grounded in the lived experience” (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 415), but it also enables educators to focus on critical self-reflection as a method for improving practice (Grumet, 1987). For example, “educators who become reflective practitioners engage in regular self-monitoring and reflection in order to diagnose and subsequently modify undesirable practices, especially those that may contribute to culture-related schisms in the classroom” (Egbo, 2008, p. 3).

To this end, van Manen (1982) illustrates the benefits of a phenomenological approach for the critical pedagogue:

But to be an educator in a pedagogic sense has to be more than a job. How do we choose to become an educator? In jest, we may cite the long holidays, and short workdays as the principal attraction. Or more seriously we may admit to be drawn to the vocation by our own positive school experiences and outstanding teachers we wish to emulate. And hopefully, we choose education primarily because we are deeply interested in children. (p. 289)

For the critical pedagogue using a phenomenological focus, this deep interest in children means that the inclusion of student experiences in curricular decisions must be deliberate. This method challenges the traditional silencing of the student experience and also attempts to focus on those learners who have typically been marginalized (Choules, 2007). Furthermore, a phenomenological concept promotes an “orientation to children in their concrete lives” (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 411). This enables the educator to understand more fully the meaning derived from personal experience and what experience brings to the educational context (Grumet, 1987; Pinar, 1977; Pinar et al., 2004; Streb, 1984).

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